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Assessment and Prospect of Russia-North Korea Summit

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Russian President Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un held talks on September 13 at the Vostochny Cosmodrome Space Center in Russia's Far East. Vostochny Cosmodrome is a key base for the Russian space industry, and Western media analyzed that the reason behind the decision to use this site as a meeting venue was to promote external propaganda that Russia could provide satellite or missile-related technology that North Korea wants. On this day, the two leaders started off their meeting with an inspection of the main facilities of the Vostochny base, followed by an expanded meeting accompanied by delegations from both countries for one and a half hours, a 30-minute one-on-one meeting, and a banquet. All those events spanned around 4 hours. What was discussed and agreed upon at the meeting between the two leaders was not made public, and there was no press conference, joint statement, or agreement after the talks. At the banquet, Chairman Kim said confidently that the Russian military and people would win against "evil." Recalling that the Soviet Union contributed to the establishment of the North Korean regime, Kim said, "Even now, our relations with Russia is our top priority. I believe the summit will elevate bilateral relations between the two countries to a new level."

The Russia-North Korea summit has taken place in four years since Putin and Kim met for the first time in Vladivostok in May 2019. At that time, it was right after Kim Jong-un returned home, when negotiations with US President Trump in Hanoi did not bear tangible fruit. Four years ago, the world's media paid attention to whether Kim Jong-un would be able to obtain a gift from Putin, such as a huge economic support. However, President Putin at the time only emphasized the need to ease sanctions against North Korea at a press conference, which was held immediately after the summit, and did not provide Kim Jong-un with any results beyond the level of promising cooperation between the two countries in principle.

Compared to the last meeting held four years ago, the Russia–North Korea summit is likely to have repercussions not only on the Korean Peninsula, Northeast Asia but on the global level. This is because military cooperation is the key motivation for the talks. It is unclear what form and level of military cooperation will be materialized following the rare summit. Russia announced it would cooperate with North Korea in sensitive areas that cannot be disclosed or announced to the public. On top of that, there are many variables that could affect the future relationship between the two countries. Among such variables are conflict between the U.S. and China, developments in the Ukraine War, and the sustainability of the Russian and North Korean regimes. Given this uncertainty, there are three issues that need to be considered in relation to the Russia–North Korea summit from South Korea's perspective.

First, the solidarity between Russia and North Korea, which not only keep an eye on the U.S. but show hostility toward it, can continue for now and could be strengthened depending on the situation. It was the Ukraine War that brought closer relations between Russia and North Korea, which had been estranged for 30 years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Until then, Russia had paid no more attention to North Korea than to neighboring countries bordering it. In fact, the fact that Putin first visited North Korea as soon as he took power in 2000 has significant implications, considering the current Russia–North Korea relationship. Putin believed the strategic assets that Russia lost with the dissolution of the Soviet Union should be recovered and North Korea was one of the geopolitical strategic assets that Russia needed to regain. In particular, around 2014, Russia took unconventional measures such as writing off 90% of the debt North Korea borrowed from the Soviet Union to facilitate economic cooperation with North Korea, but it did not lead to expected results. While Russia finds the cause of its failure in sanctions against North Korea, experts believe the more fundamental cause is that North Korea's feeble economic foundation caused the subsequent breakdown of cooperation projects.

Unlike four years ago, the close relationship between Russia and North Korea gives the impression that pursuing close partnership is a decision at a strategic level rather than a tactical level, as the two countries are putting value solidarity at the center of their cooperation. Above all, change in the direction of Russia's foreign strategy is a fundamental cause behind a close relationship between Moscow and Pyongyang. In the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation announced in March 2023, Russia declared a breakup with Western civilization and declared that it would strengthen anti-American solidarity with Global South countries to put an end to American hegemony. North Korea appears to be welcoming the fact that Russia, its former ally, has now joined the “holy war” against the U.S. Alexander Solovyov, a Russian expert on Korean Peninsula issues, recently evaluated the close relationship between Russia and North Korea and analyzed the background as follows.

On a discourse level, Moscow and Pyongyang today have many things in common: both countries are determined to fight against imperialism and hegemony while unconditionally prioritizing sovereignty. Other common features of foreign policy discourse are etatism, the image of a “besieged fortress,” and the unquestionable authority of national leaders as the source of political decisions. ... Another common denominator is that the readiness to escalate in international affairs, confirming the confrontation rhetoric with a demonstration of force.¹⁾

Solovyov’s views lend weight to the claims of Western experts that Russia is being “northkoreanized” in the wake of the Ukraine War. Russia, which is increasingly isolated from the international community, views North Korea’s “resolute” opposition to the U.S. even under severe sanctions with “respectful” eyes. Kremlin spokesperson Peskov’s statement that Russia will not consider other countries when strengthening relations with North Korea suggests that transactions between Russia and North Korea will be carried out strictly based on the choices and judgments of the two countries. Currently, Russia is facing a lack of weapons and troops necessary to continue the war, as well as external isolation. Not only can North Korea provide bullets, artillery shells, and conventional weapons to Russia, which is in trouble, but it is also viewed by Russia as a trustworthy partner which has expressed staunch support for Russia and does not hesitate to stand in the same trench as they are on the front line against the U.S.²⁾ North Korea also recognized it can secure military technology, food, and energy resources from Russia, which can help maintain its regime and continue provocations. The longer Russia and North Korea have to face a mutual enemy called the U.S., the closer their ties will inevitably become.

Second, if Russia disregards the UN Security Council resolutions on North Korea and the nuclear nonproliferation regime, in which Russia itself participated, such move will deal a fatal blow to Russia’s international status as a permanent member of the Security Council. Russia–North Korea military cooperation, whether it is North Korean weapons or Russian technology, all amounts to a violation of UN Security Council sanctions resolutions against North Korea. Should North Korea and Russia want to openly engage in military cooperation and transactions, sanctions against North Korea must be nullified. In an interview with TASS Russian News Agency after the summit, President Putin said military technology cooperation

1) “Страна, живущая в трёх эпохах: к 75-летию КНДР,” September 9, 2023, <<https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/k-75-letiyu-kndr/>> (Accessed September 14, 2023).

2) In January 2023, Kim Yo-jong, the Deputy Department Director of the Workers’ Party of North Korea, said Russia and North Korea are “standing in the same trench,” showing its support for Russia as it continues to fight against Ukraine. Russian Ambassador to North Korea Alexander Matsegora also used the same expression “in the same trench” in his remarks, expressing support for North Korea’s military action on the Korean Peninsula.

with North Korea is fully possible within the framework of international regulations such as UN Security Council sanctions resolutions against North Korea, but it appears that a little more time is needed to read Russia's intention.

Since Russia cut off ties with the U.S. and Western countries due to the Ukraine War, Russian government and academia have called for the need to strengthen solidarity with anti-American countries such as China, North Korea, Iran, and Cuba. There was an increasingly loud call for encouraging introspection, saying that Russia's approval of the UN Security Council sanction on North Korea in 2017, along with China, was one of the biggest mistakes in Russia's diplomatic history. In addition, there were many experts in Russia who argued that Russia must return a favor of North Korea, which has shown unconditional support for Russia in the Ukraine War. They went on to say that Russia should stop dwelling on sanctions against North Korea and increase the intensity of economic and military cooperation with North Korea.

However, it is unclear whether Russia will easily hand over the advanced military technology that North Korea needs. Before the summit, President Putin hinted that he could support North Korea's satellite technology, but it is currently difficult to tell whether his remarks will be limited to rhetoric or whether it will be realized at a rapid pace. Russia knows from experience that cooperation with North Korea does not necessarily proceed as Russia intends or according to its initial plan. There is no need to rush to the conclusion that just because Russia and North Korea have reached an agreement, it will be implemented immediately. In relation to this issue, the military cooperation case between China and Russia is worth referencing. There was a time when Russia was reluctant to provide advanced military technology or weapons even to China. Military cooperation between China and Russia was halted after it was discovered that China illegally reverse engineered some Russian weapons. However, in 2015, as relations with the U.S. worsened over the Ukraine issue, Russia agreed to provide S-400s to China to show off its close relationship with China. The S-400, Russia's version of THAAD, is Russia's best air defense missile weapon that threatens the West. Putin willingly sold the latest military equipment and technology to China at that time, even though he knew that China would dismantle and reverse engineer Russian weapons. Taking these precedents into account, it can be said that whether or not Russia will provide advanced military technology and cutting-edge weapons to North Korea will depend on the future U.S.-Russia relationship and developments in the Ukraine War.

The immediate expected outcome of the summit is that Russia will receive artillery shells, bullets, and conventional weapons needed for the war in Ukraine from North Korea, and in return, it will provide food and oil to North Korea. The dispatch of North Korean workers to Russia is also a cooperation agenda desperately desired by Russia, which is suffering from a manpower shortage, and it is highly likely that such cooperation will be realized after the

summit. However, all of this cooperation violates the UN Security Council's resolutions on North Korea and could become a self-destructive measure that will greatly damage Russia's international image as a trusted partner. Moreover, should Russia support North Korea's nuclear and missile development, the international community's pressure on Russia will increasingly grow since Russia itself will be denying the nuclear nonproliferation regime.

Third, although it is unlikely that close ties between Russia and North Korea will develop into solidarity between China, Russia, and North Korea, China's decision on possible trilateral cooperation may vary depending on how the U.S.–China competition will unfold. The fact that Russia and North Korea are emphasizing close ties, especially in the military field, may suggest they want to send a message to China. Putin and Kim are likely to put pressure on China with the logic that China, Russia, and North Korea should join forces in a situation where security cooperation between South Korea, the U.S., and Japan is being strengthened. The National Intelligence Service in South Korea claims that Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu officially proposed joint maritime exercises between Russia, China, and North Korea to Kim Jong-un, and in an interview with TASS Russian News Agency, Russian Ambassador to North Korea Matsegora stated that adding North Korea to joint military exercises between Russia and China seems “appropriate.” These two remarks back up the argument that both Russia and North Korea are trying to pressure China to join trilateral cooperation between the three countries. Since 2019, China and Russia have conducted joint flights training with military aircrafts around the Korean Peninsula, and also conducted joint maritime training in the East Sea in July. It is unknown whether North Korea will participate in these exercises. However, it does not seem easy for North Korea, which has heavily condemned South Korea for inviting the U.S. to conduct joint military exercise, to pursue such exercise with foreign troops. This is because it can undermine the legitimacy of the North Korean regime. Also, some experts have a compelling argument that China will not be pleased with military cooperation between Russia and North Korea. Close military ties between Russia and North Korea, from China's perspective, is a scenario that China wants to avoid because such move can make the conflict between the U.S. and China more difficult and further encourage security cooperation between South Korea, the U.S., and Japan. If North Korea conducts its seventh nuclear test, the possibility of conflict between China and Russia cannot be ruled out. Although China and Russia have been trying to speak with one voice under the common goal of ending American hegemony, their perspectives on North Korea are not necessarily the same.

The impact of the Russia–North Korea summit on Northeast Asia and the Korean Peninsula could be larger and deeper than we expected. The close relationship between Russia and North Korea is adding anxiety in that their cooperation is proceeding secretly and not easy to find due to the fact that both have been isolated from the international community and share hostility

toward the U.S. If Russia and North Korea, which pledge to use nuclear weapons at worse case, cooperate militarily, it will pose an unprecedented security challenge not only to South Korea but also to the U.S. and Japan. However, there is no need to overestimate Russia–North Korea relations at this point. Rather, we must be wary of the possibility that Russia and North Korea may use close partnership as a psychological warfare means to provoke partisanship in South Korea by exaggerating the expected effects of mutual closeness and military cooperation between Russia and North Korea. Russia is well aware of the concerns within Korean society that if South Korea's relations with Russia worsen, Russia and North Korea may become closer. President Putin's warning that Russia may also engage in military cooperation with North Korea if South Korea provides weapons to Ukraine, and the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister's recent statement that if South Korea wishes, Russia is willing to disclose the details of the Russia–North Korea summit “only to South Korea.” These two remarks show that Russia perceives Korea as a 'weak link' in the trilateral security cooperation between the U.S., South Korea, and Japan.

Therefore, Korea must strongly warn Russia not to take actions that repudiate international agreements and the nuclear nonproliferation regime as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and a nuclear weapons state. It should also be noted that cooperation with North Korea, which has enjoyed using madman strategy and brinkmanship tactics while adhering to its deformed system, could ultimately tarnish Russia's status and image as a reliable partner. There is a need for South Korea to inform Russia and the international community that the security cooperation between South Korea, the U.S., and Japan derived from the advancement of North Korea's nuclear forces, and to actively respond to the escalating threat, with a hard-nosed approach, not carried away by emotions, to perceive the current international situation and political climate. ©KINU 2023

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